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ABSTRACT

If properly administered, peer-group critiques in college writing classes can be an effective means of sharpening students' skills of critical reading while increasing their awareness of audience. If not properly administered, however, they can be unpleasant and nerve-racking for all involved. Finding that both she and her students dreaded peer critiques, a professor at Truckee Meadows Community College learned that once students were properly introduced to the process both her own and her students' attitudes changed. Students must be shown that peer critiques are not about "negative criticism," editing or proofreading. They are about how readers respond or react to a draft. Students must be given specific areas or questions to concentrate on, e.g., Are there enough examples? Is the reasoning logical? Students must also be taught how to phrase their responses to a paper. In "The Writer's Way" Jack Rawlins suggests that the writer initiate the response process by raising questions and then listen to feedback without arguing or defending the paper. A simple "thank you" is adequate. Those responding to the paper should understand that they are not grading the paper but rather offering just one response. They should be encouraged to stress the "I" not the "you." In fact, "I" statements work best ("I couldn't follow your explanation"), as they stress subjectivity. Finally, teachers, looking interested and engaged, should themselves model responses while sitting in on different peer groups. (Contains 17 references and several in-class instructions for students.) (TB)

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Peer Response: Is it worth the effort?

I began preparing for this presentation with three basic assumptions about peer response groups.

1. Peer response groups are effective in teaching composition.
2. Everyone is using them.
3. Everyone is using them more effectively than I am.

Despite my belief in assumption number one, that peer response groups are effective, I found them time-consuming and stressful for both me and my students.

I quickly discovered that two of my assumptions were false. Few of the two-year college English teachers I spoke with actually used peer response groups in their classes. The teachers I spoke with who were using peer response groups admitted to the same difficulties I was having.

Gloria A. Newbert and Sally J. McNelis succinctly identify two of the problems with peer response groups: "Many teachers grieved over the use of peer-response groups because they had difficulty getting students to respond effectively to one another's writing. . .The students, too, complained about the writing responses, saying that their peers rarely offered substantial help with their writing" (pg. 52).

Although we recognize the value of the tool, implementing peer

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response groups in college composition courses poses some problems. Teachers of high school classes seem to have better success: perhaps because their students must attend and because the class enjoys daily sessions.

Stephen Judy offers a clear rationale for the use of peer response groups. "The teacher should be A reader of student writing, but not the ONLY reader" (pg. 40). The peer response group responds as an audience. Theoretically, the writer has an opportunity to "try out" a piece of writing on actual readers and see if they respond as the writer expects. The response group helps with what Peter Elbow calls "cooking." The readers also learn which techniques communicate effectively and which don't. Students become active learners, and everyone benefits.

My students do not perceive peer response groups this way. Perhaps you have had a similar experience: the first semester I incorporated peer reponse groups into my English 101 Composition and Rhetoric classs, I put "peer response" on the syllabus. I quickly discovered that on the days "peer response" appeared, my students didn't. Not defiantly, but deliberately, students avoided the group activity. Mary Croft describes the reluctant student as "the student for whom the triumvirate of prewriting, writing, and rewriting is preceded by antiwriting" ("I Would Prefer Not To: A Consideration of the Reluctant Student"). For my students, the appropriate additional modifier is "antisharing."

I adapt quickly. I stopped writing "peer response" on the syllabus, despite feelings of guilt. Then, during my interviews with colleagues in preparation for this paper, I

learned that WITHOUT EXCEPTION, every teacher I spoke with who was using peer response practiced this same deception.

Another technique I discovered was that many teachers, to avoid conflict, made peer reponse participation elective. Other teachers made it mandatory. I tried various methods: one semester being gentle, letting the very shy or hostile students do alternate assignments. This lessened class morale. Another semester I incorporated the activity into the grading process. Students who were disruptive in their rebellion were asked to leave the classroom.

So far, so bad. We have resorted to subterfuge and coercion to force participation. Surely, some techniques exist to reduce student resistance and make peer-response a more effective classroom strategy.

Here are three suggestions:

a. TEACH the peer response process

b. MODEL the peer response process

c. COORDINATE the peer response process

Teach Peer Response

Ronald Barron, in his honest and helpful article, "What I Wish I had Known About Peer-Response Groups but Didn't," admits, "When I first used them, they were failures because I merely assigned students to groups and expected them to know what to do. I did not teach them how to use response groups effectively" (p. 24).

My post-Barron experience is that training students to use peer response is the key to successful peer response groups. The

difference in my students' behavior this semester is extraordinary.

Many students' initial reaction to peer response is that it is nothing but negative criticism. No one likes to be criticized, and the more skilled writers in the class certainly may resent being criticized by the less proficient. On the other hand, neither do people particularly like criticizing others, either because they don't feel competent to offer opinions or because they fear the social consequences.

But peer response groups aren't really for criticism. In reality, their function is similar to that of focus groups in marketing: a product or advertising approach is tested with real consumers. There are no right or wrong answers; the manufacturer and marketing professionals have to know how the market will respond before spending millions of dollars on a product or campaign.

Writing response groups work the same way. Effective writers are always thinking of the reader's response. Peer response groups in class fill this reader's role so the writer can actually hear the response. The writer asks, "Does it work?" and the response group answers "yes" or "no" and "why" (Rawlins).

This focus group analogy worked well with my students, reducing much of their natural apprehension to the process.

One of the first things to clarify with the class is that a peer response group is not a peer editing group (i.e., changing content and language vs. correcting syntax, style, mechanics, usage--per Stephen Judy pg. 47). If our class schedule allows time for peer editing, this needs to be a separate function from peer

response to the early drafts of a paper. This distinction also greatly lessens student fears about criticism. Many students resent having their papers copy-edited by peers.

Students who are not skilled in mechanics also feel better able to participate if it is clear that they are responding to theis, development, and language rather than to spelling and punctuation. One easy way to avoid the urge to edit is to have the papers READ ALOUD by the writer rather than distributed on paper. This is particularly effective early in the response group process.

Another necessary step is to present students with clear-cut guidelines for their job as readers. Especially at the beginning of a semester, a hand-out with specific items to discuss (Are there enough examples? Is the reasoning logical?) is helpful. Some time should also be spent in discussing how to make comments and suggestions--and how to take them. The writer must understand that he or she is not obligated to change the writing. The writer's job is to listen and gather responses; then later the writer can decide whether or not to make changes.

In The Writer's Way, Jack Rawlins suggests the writer should initiate the peer response process. The writer can ask the response group to look for specific items, e.g. "Do I seem to be rambling?" or even "Are my verbs boring? Is there enough action?" By assuming the control of the group, the writer reduces his/her feelings of vulnerability.

Writers need to learn that they don't have to respond themselves. They shouldn't argue with the reader--a simple "thank

you" or "I'll think about that" is adequate response to a suggestion from a member of the group. The writer's job isn't to defend the essay, but to listen to and consider the responses.

The reader's job is not to grade the essay, but to respond to it. "I" statements work best: "I couldn't wait to find out what happened next," or "I couldn't follow your explanation." Readers must be taught to be specific, to be encouraging, to stress the positive, and to say "I" not "You."

Newbert and McNelis recommend the PGP (Praise-Question-Polish) technique and use group activities in class to teach the process to their students. The teachers use handouts of sample responses and have the students discuss which responses are useful and which are too vague to help the writer. This sort of training made a measurable difference in the effectiveness of peer-response. "Specific" comments increased from 28% to 60%, and "vague" comments dropped from 19% to only 6%.

Model Peer Response

The next step is to model the peer response technique, and there are several non-threatening ways to do this. Very effective is to let the class be a response group to a piece of our own writing. It is tremendously important that this writing be a work in progress, not a finished article. We can model the open, non-defensive response to suggestions that we hope our students will have. We can demonstrate how to solicit responses and how to remain objective.

Another alternative is to bring to class a composition from a difference section of the same course. I have often done this,

reading the essay myself and, again, modeling the behavior I expect from the students. For a first effort at peer response, the students feel less intimidated knowing the writer is not actually in the classroom. Papers from a former class could also be used.

It is also possible to practice with an essay from a reader or, preferably, from a current news magazine. The advantage to this is that students recognize that even "professional" writers can benefit from reader response. The disadvantage is that these essays may be too polished to need much revision--thus discouraging the students from wanting to share their own work.

Coordinate the Response

I know teachers who leave the room during peer response time. I suggest, rather, that the instructor participate in the process, circulating around the room and encouraging both writer and readers. We must emphasize that this is serious learning. We validate the experience by participating in it.

We must impress upon the student the necessity of participating. We must insist that the student come prepared with a draft. We should be specific in what we want the students to accomplish; perhaps we need to limit the scope of the activity in a particular draft: thesis development, for example, or coherence.

Our participation helps keep the students focused, offers a sense of security to the timid, and lets us know if the technique is employed effectively. Karen Spear calls this "guiding group interaction" (Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes). "The teacher's most effective stance in maintaining collaborative writing classes is to confront group behavior openly,

to anticipate the problems students are likely to have, and to recognize them as a natural part of the process" (p.99).

For example, a recurring question regarding peer response groups concerns the composition of the group. What is the optimal number of members? Should the members be the same throughout the semester or should students rotate? Should the instructor assign groups or should the students form their own?

Many variations are possible, and, in fact, several authors in the bibliography suggest changes in group composition throughout the semester to serve various functions (Stephen Judy varies from pairs to groups of four or five to using the entire class as a peer reponse group). But the instructor must be participating in the activity to monitor what is effective for any particular group of students. I assign the groups randomly, usually with some sort of gimmick (Lifesavers are a favorite). Later in the semester, I may rig the groups to be sure each has a mix of skill levels.

Another difficulty for many instructors is the time factor. How much time can be given to response groups depends on other requirements of the curriculum and the skills level of the class, but one way to incorporate peer response into a tight schedule is to limit the scope of the groups: assign a particular item to be considered (e.g. "adequate development") and break into groups for only 15-20 minutes.

Why bother with resistant students, anxious classroom exchanges, a scrunched syllabus? Because, in the words of Peter Smagorinsky, "The experience of playing the critic helps students learn evaluative skills to bring to their own writing; their role

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of responder, then, helps make them more autonomous critics of their own work."

I begin every semester explaining to the students that I know they want to do well. No one writes poorly because he or she wants to. No one miscommunicates on purpose. The problem is that communication is difficult, and we make errors unintentionally. We have to learn how to communicate clearly and effectively. Peer response groups show us how we're doing, so we can make any needed changes to assure we communicate what we want. The marketing focus group analogy is apt.

If my students learn to be effective critics of their own work, then peer response groups are worth the effort.

Parneco
English 101

PEER RESPONSE GROUPS

Role of the Writer:

Come with a draft of your paper.

Come with at least three questions for the readers
For example: Is the thesis clear?
Did I prove the thesis?
Does any of the essay not fit?
Do I need more examples?
Can you follow my reasoning?
Is there any part you don't understand?
Do the words/sentences sound sophisticated enough for college?

Read the essay aloud.

Ask for responses and LISTEN to the comments.
You do not have to agree or disagree with the response. Just consider it. Don't argue with the responder. If you don't understand the comment, ask for an explanation.
Ask if other readers felt the same.
Thank the reader. You do not have to say whether or not you will change your writing.

YOU ARE THE WRITER. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO CHANGE YOUR WRITING UNLESS YOU FEEL A CHANGE WILL MAKE THE WRITING MORE EFFECTIVE.

Role of the Reader

Listen carefully to the essay and jot notes for yourself so you can be specific when you give your responses.
Listen for whatever the writer asked.
Do you feel the thesis is proven? Why or why not?
Are there enough examples? What would you add or delete?
Is any part of the essay difficult to follow?
Does any part of the essay seem not to belong?
What would you like to hear more about?
What do you think the author's purpose is?

Share with the reader any particularly effective parts of the essay. Use language like "I really like. . .because. . ." or "I understand just what you mean. . ."
Ask questions if you are confused by any part of the essay or feel more explanation is needed.
Suggest changes that would improve the essay. Use language like "I'd be more convinced if the examples were from more than one source." Use I-statements, not "You should" statements.

Be as specific as possible.

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